



Mean by Michael Botur. michaelbotur@gmail.com (2014). Available from Amazon.com US\$6.66. & Kindle. RRP: \$6.33. Pb, 200pp. ISBN: 139781491226650 Reviewed by Patricia Prime.

Mean is the second fiction collection from Auckland writer **Michael Botur**. The book contains fifteen short stories about bros, buds and bashings. Botur had published fiction and poetry in *Landfall*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *takahē*, *Bravado*, *Catalyst* and other literary journals.

These stories are energetic, often breathless, containing concrete detail, close observation, originality and power. Most of them use street language in a playful, or serious manner. The collection is peppered with expletives, topics about sex, drugs, viciousness and breaking the law. Botur's work might be seen to betray a debt to the tradition of modernism, the kind of luminous fluidity one finds in Rimbaud.

These are the kind of stories that don't ignore the seamier side of society: drug addicts, sex workers, drunks, criminals, racism and more. This book partakes of a familiar narrative of social and cultural exclusion, and also of a class-obsessed society. The question is whether these stories subvert the stereotypes or simply reinforce them.

The first story, "Rubbernecker," for instance, is an affectionate and funny look at youths jumping down a cliff on their bikes:

You stand on the seat and do some bunny hops. Your hands is bruised where they squeeze the bars. Your arms shake. The handlebars jolt. You bust through warning tape into, like, this area by the cliff where you're not sposda be but you don't look back.

The stereotype here is one of true grit, of youths unfazed by anything, even a broken neck.

Elsewhere, as in "Body Without a Head," a young girl tells the story of a huge box she and her brother turn into a club:

Clyde brings home some skirts, each with a different girl's name written on the tag and Daddy says grown-up words to him and Jezz thinks it's a weird thing to do to someone, to tell them hurty words with letters made of beestings, and Clyde never tries to give things to Mummy and Daddy again, although he supplies everything to the kids at whatever school they're at. Usually it's erasers and boxes of juice.

Botur sends up the coming-of-age of the girl while at the same time making the reader feel uneasy. Most of the stories included in this volume, as the back cover blurb declares are "fables" (a succinct fictional story that illustrates or leads to an interpretation of a moral lesson). Along with the laughs and the morals, there are some poignant stories. "Mr. Impatient" deftly details the difficult situation of a child taken along for a car ride while his father is on a robbing spree. In this excerpt the boy closes his eyes and sends a text to God:

Dear God,
My Dad is the super-la-tive in the whole world. Please can you let the bank give him the overgiraffe because we need Sky Movie Channel and Dad Sky Sport.

"I Got a Plan" describes a fraught relationship, albeit in veiled terms. "Vandals" is a surreal excursion in linked images, beginning with "setting the pot to boil on the stove" to fool vandals into thinking someone's at home, and moving by way of a trap the protagonist is setting, to the mysterious sounds of 'a sharp cracking' when he leaves his tent to 'piddle on the lemon bush.' "The Love Virus" tackles the subject of the AIDS Virus in a brutal, yet honest way. It focuses on Vera – 'it had to be her, hair blackened with boot polish, face painted white with foundation so she blends with the Pozzies.' "Latter Day Lepers" is written in a more humorous vein and tells the story of two young girls who attend a meeting at the Assembly of God, where they meet Timosi who tells them, "Iesu, he heal the prostitute, the sinner, the lespian. You come to da right ples".

The imagery in this story is stark and despairing but nevertheless is fun to read.

Other highlights include "Escape from Mr. Hate" – 'We was playing Escape from Mr Hate at my place. The Browns was playing with us, 'cause there's not enough normal colour kids down our street for two teams.' "R & R" opens with the sentences:



The street sign's writ in fuckin' gibberish Pig Latin or some shit, all the letters is out of order. Have you noticed everthin's hard to read? You gots ta arks Ruffy if yous've got the right street and it makes you hoha as. You hate all these state houses, one design rotated so they're facin' different ways, as if no one would notice, painted sad pale colours wiv no guts.

In the final story, "The End of the World," the protagonist says:

I spot this Tweet warning of one of those big rocky snowballs headed towards our planet and my brain goes numb and frozen, like after that thing at the Christmas party on that cruise ship with my bro's girlf, how I just sat on the deck for a while with my brain stuck in a loop 'cause I didn't have my Valiums.
What's the difference between typhoons, hurricanes and cyclones? That's what I was stuck on that night.
What's the worst out of comets versus meteors versus asteroids? Gotta find that shit out, pronto.

This book of stories contains topics encompassing youth, failure, disease, unhappiness and life, interspersed with tales of children, their parents, friends and enemies. There is humour in several of them; some are more entertaining than one might expect given their subject matter. It is difficult to read the stories without any foreground knowledge of the lives and social mores they depict. The words demand an inner listening from readers, and extra effort to keep meaningful their strangeness, their idiosyncrasy, their authentic street language and expletives. Ultimately, the voices that emerge from *Mean* are funny, likeable (or not), poignant. Botur is in an honourable tradition of comic, and yes, 'popular' stories.
